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One Gailteann Week

A Chronicle of
The Games in Ancient Days

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CHARIOT DRIVING.

—♦—
CUCHULAINN AT
WAR.

One Tailteann Week

A Chronicle of
The Games in Ancient Days

by Maura Molloy
illustrated by
A. Ó Maoláoiú



Dundalgan Press: Dundalk

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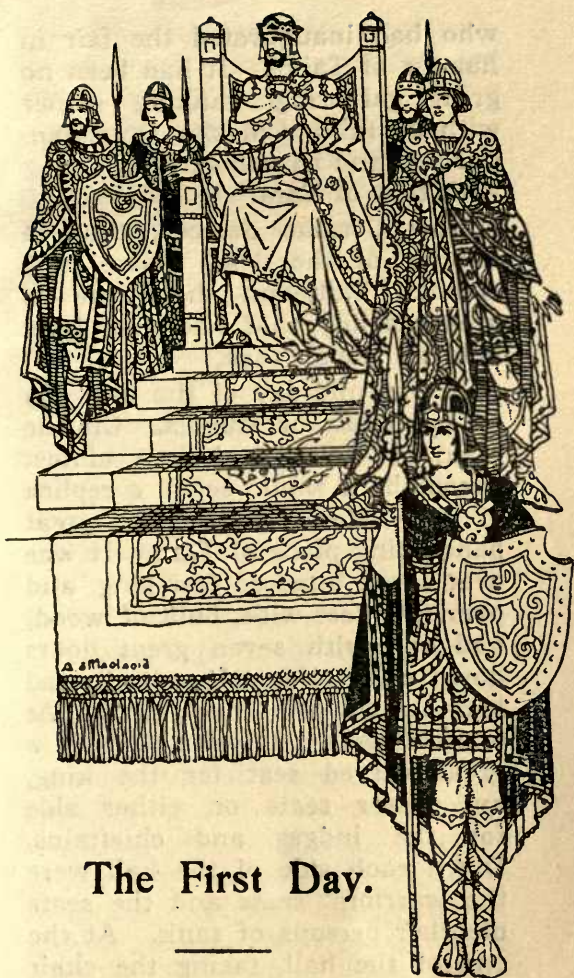
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The First Day.

THE MAKING OF LAWS and THE GREAT BANQUET.

WHEN Queen Tailte had lain asleep two thousand years in the royal burial grounds of Meath, Cormac mac Art, then Ard Ri of Ireland, decided to hold a great memorial assembly at Teltin (Telltown) in her honour.

Teltin had had its yearly assembly since the days of Lugh Lamhfhada,

who had inaugurated the fair in honour of Tailte. It had been no great gathering, ranking rather with the fairs of Macha, Cruachan, Carmen and Uisneach, than vieing with that of Tara.

Now Cormac decreed, that in honour of the dead Queen, this Aonach Tailteann should be as great as any that had ever been held at Royal Tara.

It was mid-day of the first day of Lughnasa or August. On the plain of Teltin had risen, almost overnight it would seem, a replica of the Mead Hall, the great banqueting place of Tara. It was over seven hundred feet long, and over fifty feet wide, built of wood, and had with seven great doors down either side. It was divided lengthways into five parts. At one end was a raised dais with a great carved seat for the king, and lesser seats on either side for the judges and chieftains. Down each side of the hall were the warriors' seats and the seats of other persons of rank. At the end of the hall, facing the chair of the king, were the seats of the royal servants ; and beyond these, just at the door, were tables to which the food was brought from the cooking-houses.

In the centre of the hall glowed three great fires and near them were huge vessels of mead, that would be placed on the tables when the hour of meat came.

The fame of the Aonach of Tailte had spread to the four shores of Ireland, and had been sent beyond them on sailing ships,

and men from far and near came to see how Cormac would honour Tailte.

Swarthy sailors whose ships swung in the many harbours of the south, and fair giants who had sailed from the cold northlands, and merchants from far shores seeking fair slaves, and selling rare stuffs—all were there in a noisy, merry, jostling crowd.

Travelling men from west Ireland, small, and dark, and crafty, were there ; and talkative trick throwers, with balls and wheels, from south Ireland were there ; and silent men from north Ireland, who would tell strange stories for a fee, were there.

Young boys, come to try their chance in games of skill or war, walked among the crowd abashedly. Old men and women besought to tell them their future by all sorts of tricks and charms.

Among them all, here, there and everywhere, was Slev, a merry, laughing, travelling-man with a glib tongue, a happy face, and a heart that had never known care.

“ Ha, ha ! ” cried Slev, “ look at the young bantam yonder, who has come to show us all how to slay and kill—young son, did’st bring a broidery frame at all ? ” and he skipped wickedly around a tall slim boy whose red cheeks flamed redder at his words.

Slev stopped to look at the juggler who was tossing up many balls in the air and catching them on his finger-tips.

“ ’Tis good that ! Mayhap the

king will employ thee, if thou wilt take the butter off thy fingertips before thou triest to catch the balls."

And he quickly got out of the angry man's way. With the grave bearded, alien merchants he was all quiet politeness, and for the length of truthful-sounding lies he spun for them on any matter they were interested in, with no care as to how little he knew about it, they rewarded him with trifles that a travelling-man can always sell easily to credulous country folk.

He grew hungry, and sat down in a quiet place where he devoured bread and broken meat, and drank coarse mead from a brown flagon, with great zest.

Then he settled his pack on his arm, and smoothed his hair, and straightened his belt and set out for the Place of Assembly, for it was nearing the hour when the laws would be read aloud, the judgments given, and law-breakers brought to account.

When he reached the Place he found that the king had already taken his seat. Around him were grouped in order of their importance, the Brehons or law-makers, the Druids, Poets, Historians, Champions and Trumpeters.

Slev slipped quietly, but with determination, through the crowd till he had worked his way into the front rank of those present.

He listened with great delight and appreciation to the Head-Ollave as, in a deep-ringing voice,

he read the richly-worded greeting to the king and the people that he himself had composed.

He was not quite so interested in the recital of laws, the adjustment of laws, and elimination of laws, that followed. It seemed a little dry and uninteresting to him, and he looked instead at the prisoners, and pleaders, and their friends, and testimony-givers who were grouped near him.

Then the Brehons sat down, a little way before the king, and the king sat back, he having nothing to do with the judging save that he might be called upon in a final appeal.

There was a fanfare of trumpets, a murmur from the crowd, and the trials began.

Slev listened to the impassioned plea of a man who had slain the husband of his only daughter because he had been brutally cruel to her. The dead man's relatives demanded the fixed price of compensation, the "cumhal," or three cows. The man refused to pay, contending that he had fought a duel with spears with the husband of his child,—that the dead man had been willing,—that there had been witnesses. The relatives denied this, saying that the dead man had been forced to the duel and by law they were entitled to the eric. The High Brehon gave judgment against the relatives, much to the satisfaction of Slev, who, with all others there, followed the trial with as keen an interest as the judges, and balanced the

pros and cons of the case as impartially.

Next came a man who had murdered another man for the sake of some little pieces of gold ornaments he possessed. Now, life was held cheaply enough, it usually being considered "necessary murder" to slay a murderer. But this man had been murdered secretly, and with black treachery, and as he had no male relatives to avenge his death, his wife had brought his case before the tribunal.

The accused man made no defence and was sentenced to the "punishment of the sea." He was to be bound hand and foot, placed in a skin boat, and sent adrift on the ocean.

Many other cases of bodily injuries, land disputes, and debt, did the judges deal with, justly and impartially. Slev followed them all with interest, not always, indeed, agreeing with the judgments given.

The evening drew in, and the crowd in the Place of Assembly grew smaller as the lesser cases came on.

Slev was glad to hear the fanfare from the trumpets announcing the end of the trials. The crowd slowly dispersed, the warriors and noble guests going with the court towards the Mead Hall, and the common people to their lodgings and homes.

All night long the plain of Tailte was filled with people. Booths where food and drink were sold did a brisk trade ; crowds

gathered round juggler shows, and watched fools in grotesque masks capering around with mirth-provoking antics. The slave markets were kept open all night, though there was no selling till morning. Here men gathered round and appraised the worth of the slaves and debated on possible prices.

Up in the great Mead Hall the night hours passed as merrily, if more decorously than down in the plain.

The great fires flamed high. The giant lamps in the roof of the hall shone down on many a lovely face, and many a noble warrior.

The ladies wore robes of many colours. The deep purple that the foreign merchants had brought, and the making of which they held a closely guarded secret, glowed richly in the heavily broidered, golden-pinned mantles. Everywhere showed the vivid scarlet cloaks of high rank, caught up by brooches of beaten gold, ornamented with figures of the most intricate design. Vivid enamel pins gleamed in the cloaks of the ladies, and showed finely against their thick linen, silk-broidered tunics.

Hair minds of beaten gold, rings set with stones brought from far countries, shoes of soft leather worked in strange designs with copper wire and laced with silver strings, all were in the Mead Hall, where ever and anon, the king struck a great silver gong to command silence for his speech.

The food on the long tables was rich and varied. Fine white honey-cakes were there, and wheaten bread, too. Venison was there, and roast fat pig flesh, and beef basted with honey, and meat chopped up small, and mixed with young vegetables and flavoured with quicken berries. And there were roast wood-cocks with rich gravy, cold boiled goose eggs, and fine white butter, curd cheese, and salmon-roe cakes, rare green water cresses, and red apples, hazel nuts and red and purple berries. And there was ale and mead and rare red wine from Poitou.

And well and royally did all eat, and drink, and laugh, and jest.

Now, the king would call on some favourite poet to recite to them some tale of love, or mystery, or war that he had put into beautiful lines. And it was a great honour to be called thus at the banquet of the Aonach.

Again, the king would speak to a warrior of his deeds, and ask him to tell how these things were done. And hesitatingly, and with pleas for pardon that he had no fine words to adorn his tale, the warrior would recount some deed that would draw a generous shout of acclaim from all there.

So the long night wore on.

At the bottom of the hall, Slev was entertaining the servants with his glib tongue, his bright eyes all the while losing no motion of the noble ones who sat above him, his sharp ears drinking in their every word.

And he told a tale of how he had done great deeds, that made the rafters ring again and again with the laughter of those about him, till the great gong sounded for silence.

In his tale he pretended to do the deeds of the great Cuchullain long dead, but with such a diversity of calamities and dilemmas, that all who heard him must needs laugh or suffer ill from the strain of silence.

So ended the first day of the Aonach Tailteann, and the last act of Slev before he slept, was the wagering of a most curious ornament he possessed against a mantle pin owned by one of the servants, that the warrior of his, Slev's choice, would win a clear way before him on the morrow.

*Spear
throwing*



The Second Day.

WARRIORS' FEATS.

EARLY next morning Slev made his way to the outskirts of Teltin where lay the warrior camp.

Here were young men from all parts of Ireland, who had passed the Fianna Tests at Tara that year, and were anxious to show, once again, their prowess at Teltin. It was said, that by their deeds that day, would the mighty commander Finn finally decide if they were to be of his company.

As Slev drew near the camp, he met a youth wearing a plain

mantle and an unbroidered tunic. He was broad and tall, and his hair shone red in the morning sun. His fresh face was serene, his deep brown eyes confident, as he looked down from his great height on the diminutive Slev.

Now, this was the man on whose feats Slev had wagered his curious ornament in the early hours of the morning.

“Ha !” cried Slev. “By the sun, youth, you look well ! Limbs flexible, head clear, back limber, and heart eager to win ?”

“Why yes, I hope to.”

“Did’st rub that lotion I gave to you on your thighs and calves ? ’Tis a softening lotion, as I told you.”

“I did, good Slev, but, truly, I depend more on my long training than on your short lotion-rubbing,” and his white teeth flashed as he laughed.

“There you go,” cried Slev. “You think, as your kind always has, and I suppose always will, that the brain of the clever is nought beside the body of the strong. Why, that lotion would make a grey-beard win the tests !”

“So !” laughed the youth, as Slev went away in disgust. “Then I am well set up indeed !”

But Slev would have no more talk with him. Instead he prowled around the camp, bargaining flat flasks of lotion with the credulous ones, who, now that their time came near, began to lose confidence in their bodies’ strength.

To hear him sell his flasks of lotion, and sing its praises was a good thing in itself, for he said many witty things, and praised all before him right heartily.

He left the camp as the youths formed up to march to the playing fields.

When he reached the field he found a good place, and settled himself in comfort and prepared for enjoyment, pleasantly mingled with excitement.

When the people had acclaimed the arrival of the king, and shouted madly at the sight of the mighty Finn, tall, broad and stern of face, dressed in deep blue worked with gold threads, and wearing a massive collar of gold placed on his neck by the king's own hands, and when they had called out the names of their favourites as those about to take part in the games marched past, they, like Slev, settled down to enjoyment.

Finn stood out, and in a deep voice that could be heard all over the great field, commended the youthful competitors to the people, saying that all these had come to give of their best, and that it would please the king well if the people would keep that in mind, and be not ungenerous to the vanquished.

He then said that the Sword and Shield contest would begin the games.

Two youths faced each other, clad only in tunics and without shoes, and bearing each a bronze shield and a short sword. They

began to lunge at each other, their object being disarmament. It was a well-fought contest, and the crowd cheered them, and called out advice to them, without cessation. But, in the end, one of the youths was wounded without losing his sword, and that ended the first test.

Other pairs of youths faced each other in the same manner, and Slev astonished his neighbours with the vehemence and volume of his instructions when the man he favoured came on, and no less amused them by his antics, when the young man disarmed his opponent.

“ By the sun ! ” cried he, “ that was indeed well done !—and all by my lotion, mark you—ah, ’tis the brain that counts after all ! ”

Next came the chariot-racing. Five low-built, gayly-painted chariots swung into line at the starting point. They were harnessed to fine horses who stood quiveringly alert, and driven by firm-mouthed youths whose flexible fingers held the leather reins with light surety.

“ Three times around the field without mishap, and the first in to win,” called the announcer. A dull boom from the great bronze gong, and the race started.

“ By the Grey Horse of Cuchulain, I put all on the man in the red tunic ! ” shouted Slev wildly, standing up with his neighbours, and grasping the shoulders of those nearest to him in his excitement.

The chariots travelled at a great pace. In the first round Slev's favourite overturned his car at a sharp corner much to the travelling man's disgust. No one, save the attendants, heeded that the skull of the man of the red-tunic had been cracked open.

There were no mishaps in the second round, so skilful was the driving, and Slev, who had found a new favourite, shouted madly "The green man for me!" while the crowd took up his shout.

But, in the last round the "green man" came to grief with one other, and the chariot that had been last from the beginning thundered in first, with the youth Slev had spoken with that morning, following hard on his wheels.

Followed other chariot races for older men. It was a joy indeed to watch the skilful way those grey-beards drove, there being no single mishap in any of their races. Their long training and more mature judgment easily made them superior to the younger men.

It was now mid-day and the crowd dispersed for the hour of meat.

When Slev had eaten at a friend's generous board, he went into the market, making slow progress along the long lines of booths.

There was some little time to pass before the warriors' feats were resumed, and he was minded to spend it in sight-seeing.

Everywhere, rose the wheedling cries of the sellers, and the disdain-

ful laughter of the buyers. Everywhere, save in the booths of foreign merchants. Gravely and in low tones they described their wares to inquirers only, and gravely and deliberately sold more than the loud-voiced ones. They traded mostly in fine stuffs and ornaments, and strange foods.

Here was a countryman bargaining doubtfully for a sober grey mantle, his wife standing by, and telling him what to offer.

Here was a youth buying a cloak-pin, mayhap as an offering to his lady ; here an old man with greedy eyes buying a jar of some strange spiced food.

Children ran about everywhere, the boys with small shields and warrior-spears, and with bragging tongues, the girls with apples and sweet-stuffs, and wearing little gay many-coloured cloaks.

Young wives looked at the stocks of the foreign merchants with longing eyes, and listened half-fearfully to smooth invitations to purchase.

In the slave-market, the slaves, male and female, went through various paces and showed their beauty and their strength. Slev passed through it hurriedly. He did not like the slave market.

A distant sound of trumpets brought him quickly to the playing fields.

The field was no longer roped in. People were scattered in groups about a very wide open space, at one end of which was a wooden building.

The tried warriors were now going to meet the young candidates for the Fianna in a sham battle, and the heart of Slev sang within him at the prospect.

They formed up and faced each other, bearded warriors on one side, armed only with spears and shields, and fresh-faced youths armed in like manner on the other.

Finn came between them and spoke, reminding the older men that this was but a sham warfare though weapons were used, and telling the young men, that in this mimic battle, as in real war, strategy counted no less than strength.

Then Finn left them. The gong's three notes sounded, and the battle began.

First, the older men held the post of importance—that part of the field around the wooden building, it being their task to defend it.

Backwards and forwards they surged, youth and age. Cries of battle rent the air. To the onlooker it all seemed real enough.

The young men fought desperately to prevent the success of a move of the warriors towards the door of the building. But slowly, step by step, the warriors retreated, and soon they were within the building with the door safely bolted.

The young men withdrew and talked together for a few moments

Now was the time for strategy, though to listen to Slev, one would think that the time was past for that.

Some youths were sent to skirmish round the building, but flights of spears from every window sent them back in haste. Their captain sent them back with additions to their number. Came another flight of spears to meet them and again they retreated. This happened three times, and Slev noticed that the last flight of spears was lesser than even the first, when the number of attackers was smaller.

The youths now made a vigorous rush at the door, heedless of the few spears that came through the windows, and, the doors being broken in, the weaponless warriors within surrendered.

The youths now undertook the defence of the building. But the older men speedily proved their superiority. They concentrated on getting between the defenders and the building, and in a very short time again held it.

Finn acclaimed the elder men victorious, while allowing the clever ruse of the youths its due meed of praise.

Spear contests now began. Twenty young men stood out divested of cloaks and each holding a long bronze-headed spear.

Lithe and fine to look on, their young bodies, as they ran a few steps, bent down and then back for the cast. Loud the applause as each spear went farther than that thrown before it, till at last the sixteenth man, who was Slev's favourite, flung it very far beyond the rest. His was adjudged the

winning throw, as none after came near it.

This ended the Warriors' Feats. Though not so varied as in other years, Slev agreed with his neighbours that more skill had been displayed, and he was especially proud of the red-headed youth who had lived nobly to his hopes.

The travelling-man spent the night going from one entertainment to another, buying here, and selling there, and drinking all the while great quantities of mead.

As morning neared he snatched an hour's needed sleep in the shelter of a buffoon's tent, and his dreams were full of the doings of the day.



The Third Day.

OUTDOOR SPORTS.

SLEV had spent the early hours of the morning watching the boxing and wrestling contests. Very clever had the boxers been, and very supple and pleasing both wrestlers and boxers, and Slev's throat was sore from shouting encouragement and reproof.

Now he was making his way to the artificial pool where the swimmers were to compete. He took one of the many seats, sloping upwards that surrounded the pool, and began an animated argument with the man next to him on the merits of the boxing competitors. They disagreed on nearly every

point, and only the timely arrival of the swimmers prevented the argument from reaching an unfortunate crisis.

The majority of the competitors were youths, the exceptions being bearded sailors from hot countries, who had decided to take a chance.

Slev strongly disapproved of these strangers.

“For,” said he, to a man near by, “these men from the hot south countries have a natural aptitude for water that we in Ireland have not. It is almost their natural element. How else to keep the body cool and fresh in the burning air of countries whose sun scorches all the white and red from a man’s body, and leaves him a dirty brown instead?”

His neighbour thought this very true, and Slev very clever to have thought of it, and together they watched the diving which had now begun.

Straight dives, dives with a single somersault, dives with the glory of a double somersault, back dives, and dives of height, some from the very top of a wooden tower nearly one hundred feet high. Slev and his neighbour enjoyed it all. The races were hardly contested and finely won, and Slev said there was



no one, even in the South lands, to beat swimmers of Ireland. For the bearded foreigners made a very poor show, they seemed to tire easily, and were without endurance, or great speed, and only the innate generosity of the crowd prevented them openly showing their scorn of these men.



The swimming contests finished, Slev went to the playing field to see how his red-headed friend was doing at running and jumping. He found the first race over and it had not been won by the youth. A three-times-round-the-field race was

now starting, and with the boom of the gong, and the forward leap of the runners, began one of the closest-run races of the day. Clenched hands, heads back, and every nerve straining, they went around the field, half a hundred young men all bent on winning.

Slev's excitement was uncontrollable when in the final round of the field, the youth of the red head slowly gained his way to the front of the group who were leading. And when the youth came in, a bare pace ahead of the others, Slev felt the happiest man in Teltin. Then followed other races, races of boys and young men, races of old men, races between picked men of the five kingdoms, and races of warriors in full war gear, and Slev sat patiently through them all although he had lost interest in them.

Next came the obstacle races. Over rough made walls, and wide artificial streams of water, through ploughed stretches, and stretches covered with bushes and undergrowth went the youths, with many a fall and dropping out of the runners.

Slev was particularly interested in the water jumps because so many came to grief there, and to his annoyance, at the widest of them, his favourite stumbled and landed squarely in the middle of the water.

The travelling-man was glad when the running competitions were over, and wandered around the field meeting friends and exchanging gay remarks, till the jumping contests began.

Suddenly he saw standing a few feet away from him the warrior, Finn mac Cool. He knew how that great commander of the Fianna valued the fleet of foot, and guessed that he was looking for likely recruits for his famed company of warriors. He hurried to where the group of young men who were about to take part in the jumping contests were talking together and among them was his friend. Slev took him aside.

“ You ran well, friend,” he said. “ Jump as well, and maybe you will land in the middle of the Fianna, for Finn himself is on the field.”

“ So ? ” said the other quietly. “ I thank you for telling me, but I fear you have made me unsteady.

I had rather his eye were not on me."

"Be not a fool!" said Slev. "Here, take my lotion and all will be well," and he hurried away to stand near Finn so that he might watch the play of feeling on that grave face.

Two stalwart men of equal height held a light pole on their shoulders and over this the youths were to jump. As the contest went on the pole was raised, and, at last, when it was raised to the full height of the men's upraised arms, Slev's friend cleared it with a half a finger length to spare.

The travelling-man was loud in praise of his favourite, hoping that Finn would mark his words, but that mighty man moved on to where the quoit or disc-throwing tests were going on.



A large crowd had gathered to watch this game as it had been a favourite one of the dead Cuchullain, and Slev was for telling of the warrior's feat in the Red Branch House, when Cuchullain had sent the heavy disc out through the roof, but he found that those about him were as wise as he, and so was silent.

The quoits were first thrown upwards against the walls of the building that had been used the day before for the sham-battle. Higher and higher was the quoit thrown and points were given for these throws to the competitors in the distance throwing which followed.

Here, too, Slev's friend came out well, to that person's great glee.



When the mid-day meal had been eaten, Slev followed the rest of the vast crowd to the fields where the horse-racing, hound contests, and boar and wolf-hound fighting were to be held.

First came the horse-racing. Slev watched race after race, loving every one of the noble-looking horses and their skilful riders. They rode without saddle or stirrups, and riding thus, it was a joy to watch them. All around the travelling-man other men were wagering away their possessions, and treating gain and loss alike with a laugh and a merry word.

The horse-racing over, Slev watched a hound contest over a broad green plain, and pleasant it was to see the sleek, long-nosed greyhounds as they cut swiftly through the air, their feet scarce touching the ground.



Next, in a small wooded place near by, three wild pigs were loosed from a short captivity, and a band of youths went into the wood with spears and swords, and with great wolf-hounds following eagerly after them. A great crowd gathered to watch the sport, careless of the danger. For when the hounds gave tongue, and the chase started, no man knew when he might get entangled with boars, and hunters, and hounds.

Slev went up a tree determined to see all he could, and found that he had a fine view of the chase, he having been wise enough to choose a tall tree that stood on a little height.

A great number of the foreigners who had come to the Aonach were present. This was because such sport was common to their own countries, and they were anxious to see the manner in which the Irish youths would deal with the boar.

One of these men told Slev about the games of Rome where hounds were used as well as men to hunt the wild animals in the great arena, and Slev, as he went up his tree, hoped that his countrymen would make a good show.

Now the air rang with the shouts of the young men, the cry of the dogs, and the hoarse grunts of the pigs, and above all was Slev's voice as he noted the progress of the hunt.

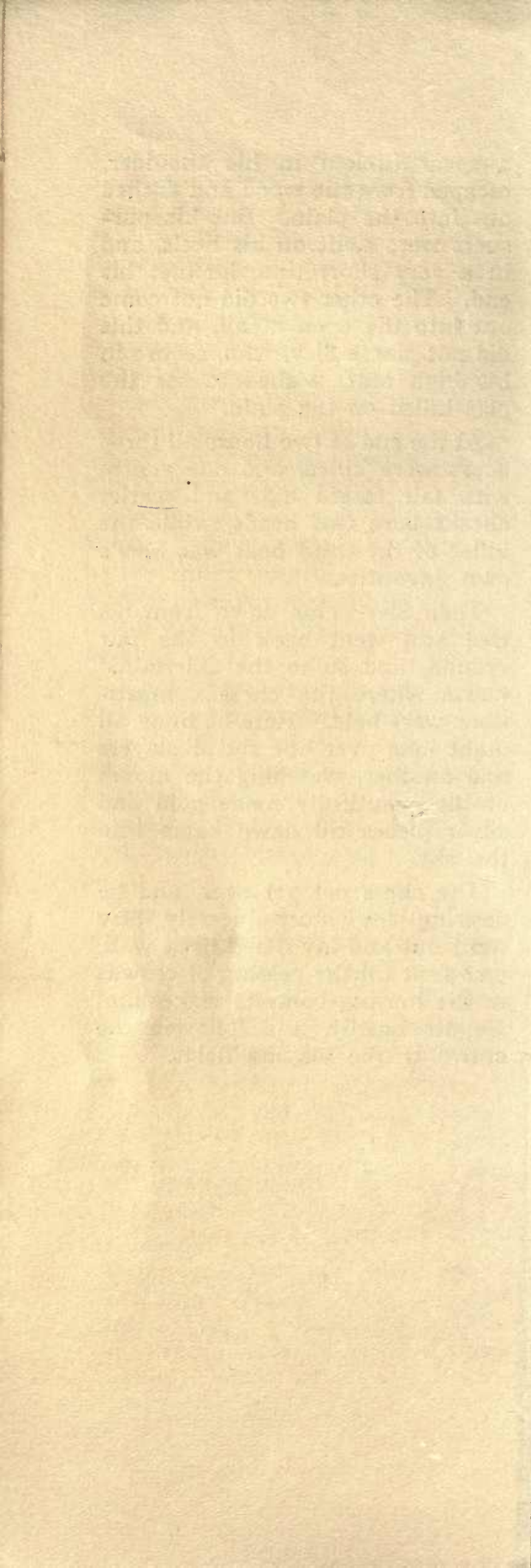
Encouraging cheers came from the crowd. There was one wild moment when a maddened boar,

a spear broken in his shoulder, escaped from the wood and dashed out into the plain, But his pursuers were swift on his heels, and in a very short time he met his end. The other two did not come out into the open at all, and this did not please Slev, who, secure in his high seat, wished to see the pigs killed on the plain.

At the end of two hours all three boars were killed, and one youth, with fair tossed hair and scarlet cheeks bore two heads, while the killer of the third boar was Slev's own favourite.

Then Slev came down from his tree and went back to the fair ground, and so to the chieftains' house where the chess competitions were held. Here he hung all night long over one set of players and another, watching the moves of the beautifully made gold and silver pieces till dawn came into the sky.

The chess not yet over, and he desiring sleep most sincerely, Slev went out and lay down by a wall, and slept till the passing of crowds to the hurling contests woke him. He ate hastily, and followed the crowd to the playing fields.





The Fourth Day.

HURLING, MUSIC ARTIFICER'S WORK AND MARRIAGE BARTER.

ON the field stood the players—the men of the south against the men of the east.

One held the ball, made of woollen yarn wound tight and covered with leather. All carried their hurleys of ash, beautifully

shaped, and of great smoothness. Here and there might be seen the bronze-bound hurley of a chieftain's son. Players, well matched, they gave promise of a brave game.

Up and down the field went the ball, now dangerously near the two bushes that marked the goal of the southerners. Up and down the field went the players, fleet of foot and swift of arm, keen of eye, and sound of wind.

Now and again a player left the field with a smashed shin or a bruised arm, and another took his place.

The men of the south, beaten in the end after a hard fought game, had this sad consolation offered them by Slev :



“ You know,” cried he, “ they were on their own ground—they knew the little hills and hollows, and where to be swift and where to be slow.” For Slev, being a man of wide Ireland, favoured neither side, but acclaimed the best.

All through the day matches were played and won, but Slev grew tired of hurling, and did not return when he left the field at mid-day.

In the afternoon the music competitions were held in the great Mead Hall. The king and his court were present, and all who competed were assured of the bounty of the king in addition to the prize offered, if he were successful.



Slev was in his element. He knew well, and delighted in the nature of musicians. To him they were all children with only one toy. And he delighted to make them jealous, for then they would talk, and say all kinds of bitter things about each other, which they did not in the least mean. but which Slev enjoyed exceedingly.

Singers were there with small harps on which they accompanied themselves, walking up and down, humming in low tones as they walked. Bands of chorus singers stood apart, and whispered among themselves.

Bag-pipers with bag slung from the shoulders, and pipe in mouth, were making strange noises on every side, while single pipe or

tube players, played softly in odd corners.

Trumpeters were there with long thin trumpets of red bronze, ornamented with raised studs, and when the time came, these would give hunting calls, and meeting signals, and war blasts.

The silver gong sent out its warning notes, and the announcer called on the chorus singers to come forward.

The first chorus began, and the Hall was filled with the gentle sound of an "occupation song." As they sang it seemed as if many wheels were softly spinning, spinning, and many feet beating a measure as the wheels went round, while the gentle breathing of the spinners could be plainly heard.

There was a round of applause, which ceased when the next chorus began to sing their "occupation song." This time they sang of a boatman far out in his little boat on the sea. Slev avowed he could hear the waves lapping, and the cry of the white gulls, and the creaking of the paddles as the boat moved on.

Next came the single singers. With a few notes plucked from his harp, the first man sang of sleep, gently and sweetly, and peace came down, and soon heads were nodding and the king was blinking, and Slev fell forward against a piper who stood near him, and so earned loud words of reproach which broke the singer's spell.

Followed singers who sang of war, and death, and of love, and

tube-players whose thin, sweet notes echoed for long in the hall.

But all these music's memories were broken up when the high, shrill note of the bagpipes was heard.

Up and down went the competitors, with inflated cheeks and quick-moving fingers, till Slev, who disliked what he called "bag-music," was desirous of leaving the hall, but could not, with any ease, press his way through the dense throng behind him.

Last came the trumpeters, and for a while fanfares and battle-calls filled Slev's ears.

Then the trumpeter with the long bronze horn came, and Slev was glad the bagpipes had not driven him away. For this youth brought into the room all the song-birds of the forest, and he trilled each separate note truly. Crow-talk and raven-talk and corncrake-screech he made them all clear too, and he ended by a grand gathering of the birds where they chattered, croaked, sang and screeched till the king put his hands to his ears, and gave a sign to end the din.

The music competitions over, the centre of the great hall was cleared and long tables set down it.

Then came a strange procession. Old men and young men, each with some object large or small in his hands, came in and passed before the king, bowing low as they did so. Then they walked down by the tables, and each laid

on the table the object he carried, and when the last man had passed out, there was heaped on the tables a wondrous collection of metal work, wood-work and leather-work.

Here were rings and bracelets of gold, silver, and red bronze, marvellously worked in thin metal and set with precious stones, amethysts, topazes and sapphires. Here were chains of gold links, each link worked, and set with pearls. Here were torques of twisted threads of gold, finished with jewelled balls, and torques all worked in wondrous scroll designs and interlacings. Here were goblets, and bronze shields, and spear heads, and swords all finely made, and finely ornamented. Here were brooches, large and heavy, here were gold hair minds, and gold ear-rings, and gold hair-balls, all of them things of rare beauty.

Here were shoes and sandals of soft leather, worked in copper and silver, and gold wire, here were belts all silk-broidered, and wire-broidered too ; here models of wooden boats, and wooden house utensils, and tools, plough shares, spinning wheels, and many another thing besides. Here, too, were gold, and silver, and bronze, and carved, wooden and bone chess-pieces, on boards with jewel set corners.

When Slev had looked his fill at these things he went to the Hall of the Women, where were displayed richly broidered cloaks, that had meant long busy days in far

sunny parlours ; the careful choosing and setting out of designs, and the skilful matching of silks.

Here were saffron linen tunics of rare material and fine make, and fur-trimmed cloaks of great value and beauty ; here were cloth gloves thick with gold broidery, and skin gloves warm and soft.

And Slev looked at them all and found them good to see.

It now being late, Slev went out and passing by a house where marriage barter was going on, went in.

In the centre of a room sat the parents of youths and maidens. Gravely they listened to proposals, and weighed them up and made decisions, and argued one with the other on the relative merits of " bride-prices " as the dowers of maids were called. Slev thought it an odd business to buy a wife without knowing what she was like, as was the way in most cases. But with a shrug he acknowledged it as the custom of his country, and was going out when he received a shock.

He saw his red-headed friend with his parents, who were deep in talk with the father and mother of a daughter, whom they described as being " small, dark, a good keeper of the house, and having a good bride-price of three cows."

" Come hither, son, and tell me what is this ! " cried Slev, excitedly " Surely thou art to be of the Fianna of Finn, and knowest the

rules of that band? Your people are giving for this maiden, and I see they are getting a fair marriage-price with her. How then can you hope to be of the Fianna, if you take a price with your wife?"

"Peace, friend," said the youth, "I have been passed over by Finn, and would comfort myself with this maiden whom I have long known of, and loved. Perhaps 'tis better to have a wife than a place in the Fianna—who knows? And if I barter not she goes from me—so!" and, with a shrug of broad shoulders, he turned back to his business.

Slev went sorrowfully out. He had wished a warrior's honours for the youth and—

His musings were cut short by collision with a flying figure who fell almost into his arms, with a spear-thrust in his side, and other wounds beside.

"Winds of Ireland, what is this?" gasped Slev.

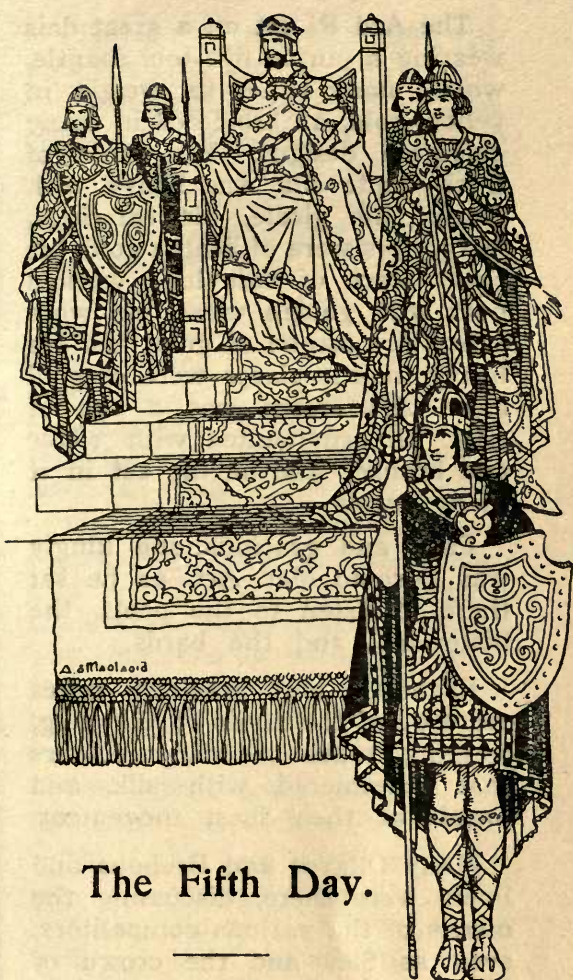
The man lay moaning at his feet and to the crowd that gathered speedily Slev could only say he knew nothing of it.

He was near to serious trouble, though he knew it not. When he was being questioned by a warrior guard, there burst into the crowd a man all distraught and crying out:

"I have not killed him—it is all a mistake, O friend—a fool's mistake I made. Why did we toss words over it at all!" and he knelt by the man on the ground.

The guard let go his hold of Slev, and seized this man, while Slev gladly went his way.

He heard next morning that the man who had broken the law commanding quiet and seemly demeanour, and avoidance of disturbance during the time of the Aonach, had paid for his transgression with his life.



The Fifth Day.

POETRY HISTORICAL AND BARDIC TALES.

THE Place of Assembly was thronged with a brilliantly garbed gathering. Everyone seemed have donned their best on this day that was held as one of the most important of the Aonach week.

Even Slev had managed to make himself almost a dandy in honour the day.

The Ard Ri sat on a great dais wearing a purple five-fold mantle, worth many times its weight in yellow gold, all brodered in many elaborate designs. His tunic of thick white silk was heavy with jewels, his girdle, his ear-rings, his garters were of beaten gold, his shoes were of soft hide worked over with golden wire. He wore a massive torque of gold, and his heavy mantle clasps were of gold also. His crown was a cap of gold, all ornamented with silver and bronze, and having set in it many jewels.

Fine, and gracious and kingly was Cormac Mac Art, as he sat there to listen to the poets, the historians, and the bards.

Beautiful and gracious ladies sat around the chair of the king, wearing robes of many colours that shimmered with silk and jewels at their least movement.

Many Ollaves and Brehons and Poets were there, discussing the merits of the various competitors, even as Slev and the crowd of common people were doing.

Poets with wrinkled brows, and lips that moved in silent repetition of set pieces, gathered in a corner of the Place. They were, for the most part, young, though here and there might be seen the bent brows of a greybeard. All the poets carried small harps with eight strings, and little bronze branches of bells.

Historians sat quietly apart. They were all ancient men with

heads that the years had filled with precious lore.

Ollave-apprentices moved among the crowd bragging of how well they were preparing to make a great show at some further assembly, and telling how they would treat the set pieces if it was their turn.

Buffoons and jesters were everywhere among the common people. They looked for rich material from the competitors, liking to savour their fooleries with a little wisdom, now and then.

The little tinkling bells which the jesters wore at their sides, and struck often with a wooden wand made slight pleasant music. The buffoons bawled out rude jokes that were met and parried by the crowd to the accompaniment of gales of laughter.

The silver gong boomed out and there was silence.

The Chief Poet stood up in his robe of many coloured birds' feathers, and spoke to the people, telling them of the ancient glories of the poets and of the virtues and the beauty they brought to life, and, finishing, he said :

“ I bring to your notice, O King and People, the Satire of Aiden.”

A small dark young man, wearing a black cloak, came before the king, and, after bending his head to him, he turned half to the people, and half to the Head Poet and began his satire.

At first his speech was slow, then

it quickened till the words came tumbling out—blistering, biting, scourging words, so that it seemed to Slev, who listened wide-eyed, that they must, these words, turn to scorpions and run among the people.

The poet spoke of an enemy who had harmed him, and no man there wished to be that enemy. Snarlingly, came his desire that his enemy might be treated in a most terrible way (which he most venomously detailed) by the high gods.

When he had finished he stood back, and bent his head to the applause that thundered round him.

Great beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, but, as Slev said, the poet was not alone in that, for many a man wiped away an involuntary tribute to the satire of Aiden.

The poet then gave the set piece, which consisted of praises of all the kings of Ireland and was long, and somewhat wearisome.

Other satires were given, but none was as good as that of Aiden, so the Head Poet said, and so the people agreed.

A youth next stood out at the command of the Head Poet, and began a poem of the sea.

He plucked at his harp as he droned on in a monotonous voice of the eternal battle of wind and wave with the rocks of the sea-shore, and the cold resistance of the rocks, and the gentle interference of the sun, who would with warmth and light end that endless quarrel.

He told of sea-birds crying out that the battle cease, and the winds go home, and leave them peace, that they might perch in comfort on high rocks by the sea ; told of boats that had been dragged into that fight and had gone down to the sea floor. And he ended in lament, that when the great ending of all things came, the wind and the waves would still be at war with the rocks.

“ A dour man, that,” said Slev, when the sad voice ceased. “ Myself I like merry poems of love and——”

He was called on to cease. Two poets stood up facing each other. They began a test of wit. With many a shake of his bronze bells, the first chanted a mad, glad verse of a song of hound-chase, and deer-chase, and shouts of huntsmen in the early dewy morning.

The other quickly took up the song when the first youth stopped. The verse given was from a very old poem that the giver had thought none but he had knowledge of.

There were many other wit-tests, some very humorous, and some very sad, and all listened eagerly to by the people.

Then followed the improvisation test. The Head Poet called upon a youth to make a poem on the things that seemed beautiful to him.

As the sweet rich voice of the youth went on, it truly seemed to Slev, that he walked in the green

woods in the early morning. Long shafts of golden sunlight filtered through the tall trees. Everywhere was bird-mirth, and everywhere the young winds played, and danced, and whispered in the tree-branches. And through it all ran slender threads of rare music—or was it the notes the poet plucked from his harp as he spoke?—and they entered Slev's being and filled him with pure ecstasy. And everywhere grew flowers of every shape and perfume. And in that wood were little wattled houses, holding their fill of the happiness of man, and woman, and child. And clear little ever-talking streams ran through it, telling as they went, of all the wonder-things they had seen since they left the brown bosom of their mother. And then, lowly, came the sad, yet strangely beautiful note of honourable death, and so the rich young voice ended.

There was a great silence then, followed by ringing applause, generously given and well merited.

Many another poet stood out, and many another wonder-litany was sung, till it seemed as if the listener must be caught up in a great web of ringing, silver speech.

Then came the time of the historians.

The Head Ollave called on an old man, bent with the burden of his years, to repeat to them the tale of the burning of the Hostel of Da Derga, and the death of the great King Conaire Mor.

In a strong voice, despite his years, the old man began.

First he traced the genealogy of Conaire, going so far back that men had almost lost count of the years.

Then he told a weird tale of the youth Conaire coming to Tara all naked, at midnight, and being clothed and brought into the palace of the king. Of the many geasa or hero-bonds that were laid on him. Of the long sixty-nine years of his reign, when prosperity was all over the fair face of Ireland, the very elements favouring the land graciously.

He told of the three foster-brothers of Conaire, who became raiders, and so his enemies. Of his banishing them from Ireland, and of their going to the King of Britain for aid to fight against Conaire.

He told of the supernatural workings that made the King break his hero-bonds one by one, so bringing down the vengeance of the gods. Of his setting out to meet his foster-brothers and their friends who had landed at Howth. Of his resting the night at the house of Da Derga, a Leinster lord. Of the attack on the hostel by his foster-brothers, who had heard of his march out to fight them, and who had come up to him instead of waiting for his attack. Of the wonderful company in the hostel—champions, and poets, wise men and warriors.

He told of the fight round the hostel, and of the firing of it. Of the flames that drove out the King

and his men after they had tried to quench them with wine, there being no water in the hostel, and the enemy guarding the one well near by. Of the gallant fight of Conaire and his men with the great numbers of his enemies who surrounded the burning hostel. Of the wounding of Conaire. Of the terrible thirst of Conaire Mor as he lay wounded, and of the warrior Mac Cecht who went in search of water and could find none until dawn was in the sky, when he found an unguarded well many miles away, and there filled his flagon. Of his return, only to see the raiders strike off the head of the king. Of his pouring between the lips of the dead king the water. Of the pale lips that so craved the cooling draught, that they spoke their gratitude even in death.

Spellbound they listened to it all, and when the fine voice, grown thick with its long toil, finished, they gave him generous applause.

Other historians followed, who were asked for the recital of various important events, and the telling of genealogies of chieftains present, and of others long dead.

When the tests of the poets and historians were finished, bards appeared, and sang over in monotonous voices, old tales and legends of love and war.

This done, the rest of the evening was given over to the jesters, buffoons and gleemen, who made a play about happenings everyone there was familiar with, and very

amusing they were with the painting on their faces, and the nimbleness of their fingers, and the distortions they put their bodies through.

The jugglers kept circles of short knives hurtling through the air for a long time, and the buffoons went about saying apposite things, and the jesters made merry songs about the great people and the common people, and both great and common people enjoyed them well.

And the day ended with a great banquet that was kept going till morning, and be sure that Slev saw and enjoyed everything there.



The Sixth Day.

THE GIVING OF THE PRIZES and THE FINAL BANQUET

SLEV rose early despite his late rejoicings on the night before. He had several things that he meant to dispose of before he went away from Teltin on the morrow. He wished to meet the people before the prize-giving which took place in the afternoon, because there would be no chance of doing business after that.

So out he went with his pack, keeping a sharp look out for the man with whom he had laid a wager on the red-headed youth,

for he, Slev, was undoubtedly the winner of the mantle-pin.

The market was thronged with people who had waited till these, the last few hours, in the hope of getting goods cheaply.

Some of the booths had already been taken down, and their owners talked together of how poor a trade they had done, while Slev loitered to listen with his tongue in his cheek.

He stood for a while in the horse-market which was thronged with people. This was the most important live-stock fair in the province. He was called on to give opinion on various animals, he being a noted man all over the country for the curing of the ailments of horses. He gravely did so, and was rewarded by one with the promise of raiment, by another with the expressed hope of his Slev's company at his table some day soon, when he would be indeed welcome. And Slev was well content with these and other promises of reward for his service, for he knew they would be loyally and generously kept.

The "slope of embroidery" where all the past five days women had sat working broidery patterns, and showing them to all who cared to look, was empty, and Slev, who passed it when he left the horse-market, was pleased to be poetically sad.

"'Twas truly like a fair plot of flowers," he said to a man passing by, "and now the summer is over, and the flowers are dead!"

But the man, who had not a mind for poetry, only grunted and passed on.

Further on Slev met the red-headed youth, with his new-wed wife. Now Slev had meant to go to the Hill of the Buying and see the ceremony of the paying of the Bride-price, and afterwards to the Marriage Hollow to see the marriage itself being performed. But the attractions in the Place of Assembly had proved too much for him and he had forgotten all about his good intentions.

He now wished the youth and his shy young wife well, though he could not help saying that, in his poor opinion, a good man had been lost to the Fianna of Finn. At which the youth laughed, and taking the arm of his wife went off, saying, that he preferred that things should be as they were, and that a man like Slev, who had no wife, could not be judge of a man who had, which first amused Slev, but on second thought annoyed him very much.

In the slave-market Slev saw that but two slaves were left. Foreigners they were with long yellow hair, and slight bodies, and sad pale faces. Their owner, a bearded old man with cruel eyes, was setting them to work at cleaning up their part of the market, it being the law that when the market was over, the ground must look as if no market had been there. Slev listened to the slight clank of their leg chains with a face of pity, and hurried away

when the old man would have spoken with him.

He sold several cakes of his healing paste to youths who had taken part in the tests, and had sore bodies to show for it, and got rid of coarse mantle pieces to poor wives who had little to spare for such things.

At the servants' end of the Mead Hill, he sought the man who had wagered with him, and finding him, entered into a wordy barter. In the end Slev got the mantle-pin he coveted and sold the curious ornament to the man for provisions, which he packed away for his journey that would begin with the dawn of morning.

He went back to the market then and strolled around until it came to the time of mid-day meat.

In the afternoon he made his way to the Place of Assembly, and was obliged to force a path through a dense crowd all bent in the same direction.

"Gods of Ireland," cried he, as he became entangled with chariots and horses, just outside the entrance, "Is every fool in Ireland who has no sense of order with us to-day? See, dolt! thou hast torn my mantle! And look, the bright-haired one from the north—what tale think you will he bring home of your manners?"

Thus, with reproofs and scoldings, and free use of his elbows, did Slev reach a good place inside. He examined his mantle, and was pleased to find that it was not torn as he had thought.

The king came slowly in, followed by Ollaves, Brehons, champions, and warriors. The ladies came next, smiling at their share of applause. Finn stood by the king and spoke gravely with him. The champions sat back with a faint show of indifference, as if they would say they preferred the hard days of battle to these gentle hours of peace.

Then, slowly, with a stately and proud mien, as befitted the victorious, came those who were to receive prizes at the hands of the king.

Fanfares from the trumpets, shouts from the people, smiles from the king and the ladies, greeted them as they walked, two by two, into the open space before the king's seat, and formed into a square there.

The king stood and addressed the silent people. He gave thanks to them for their gracious attendance there ; for their seemly demeanour all through the days of the fair ; for their gentle tolerance,—here Slev felt the red of a blush in his cheeks,—to all who had given of their best that they might be entertained. To the men who had come from far countries he spoke also giving them, too, his gracious thanks for their presence.

When the cheer that greeted the end of his words had died away, Finn was on his feet before the people, and the cheers rose again in a long wild note of welcome.

The great general spoke but a

few words. Words of praise for warrior feats ; commendation of certain youths ; censure of others ; thanks that strong wise men still lived in Erin ; the hope that those there who had been made of the Fianna would add more glory to its already shining fame, and then he was done.

A long table covered with a fair linen cloth was now brought in and placed before the king. On it were the prizes to be presented to the winners of the competitions.

First stood out Aiden, the young satirist. No smile broke the gravity of his face as he bent his head for the touch of the king, and took in his hands the golden cup that was his prize.

Followed other poets, who each received a valuable gift.

Next came the historians, and their prizes were ornaments of gold.

Came the pipers, the harpists, the singers, the tube players, and the trumpeters, all taking gold and silver prizes from the hands of the king.

Came the chess players to receive, each victor, a carven set of pieces. Came the artificers and craftsmen, each to be awarded a miniature golden emblem of his trade.

Came the youths who had been victorious in the sports, to be given each an ornament of gold and of bronze.

Came the youths who had been

successful in the warrior feats to kneel before Finn, mighty leader of the Fianna of Ireland, and receive at his hands bronze shield or spear, or short, hilt-ornamented sword.

And the ladies clapped their palms together softly, and the king rose to say he was glad there was no outstanding competitor, that the prizes were evenly divided, because that meant an equality of brains and strength in the men of Ireland.

And he bade all the people honour him by coming there to the Place of Assembly, some few hours later, when he would entertain them with a banquet, open and free to all.

Cheers, fanfares, bagpipe music, the thin note of harps, the reedy note of tubes, the clashing of poets, bell-branches, and the tinkling of jester's bells, all combined in one great, happy, swell of sound as the king left the Place of Assembly.

Followed the banquet, and everywhere it was agreed ; firstly, that the Aonach of Teltin had equalled, if not beaten, the Aonach of Tara ; secondly, that the men of Ireland were without equal ; and thirdly, that this banquet, spread by the king's bounty, was the finest ever placed before any man, woman, or child there.

When the first pale streaks of dawn showed in the east, Slev went out, and getting his pack, folded his mantle around him and awaited

the signal of dismissal. It came soon.

At a sign, every spear-carrying man there stood, and struck his spear-head against his neighbour's, and, with great clash of spears ended the Aonach of Teltin.



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